



# MINDFULNESS: A KEY TO IMPROVE METACOGNITIVE SKILLS

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## ABSTRACT

Mindfulness means knowing what is happening while it is happening, no matter what it is. We can practice mindfulness in our everyday activities, such as walking, eating, writing, reading, cooking, washing the hands or dishes etc. Mindfulness is one of the best techniques for treating physical and psychological difficulties. Thich Nhat Hanh, a well-known Buddhist monk and author of several books on meditation, describes the practice of mindfulness as being aware of what one is doing while one is doing it. It is an attribute of consciousness long believed to promote well being by strengthening meta-cognitive skills and by changing schemas related to emotion, health and illness. Mindfulness involves the ability to notice and observe one's own thoughts. A mindful individual maintains enough distance from his/her own thoughts to view them impartially, and this aspect of mindfulness makes it a meta-cognitive skill, involving cognition about cognition, which is the essential component of several skills like knowledge of cognition (meta-cognitive knowledge) and regulation of cognition. Mindfulness helps an individual to improve cognitive flexibility including meta-cognitive insight which refers to the development of greater intuitive understanding and awareness of one's own thinking processes.

**KEYWORDS:** Mindfulness, Meta-cognition, Meta-cognitive skill, meta-cognitive knowledge, Regulation of cognition, Meta-cognitive insight.

### Mindfulness and its Attributes

Mindfulness is one of the world's most ancient meditation techniques (initiated by Gautama Buddha). Though mindfulness has its origins in Buddhism, it is a basic technique that has widespread cross-cultural applications. This is due to its emphasis on experiential reality rather than on particular cultural constructs or informational content. In western psychology, mindfulness is described as 'paying attention in a particular way on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.'

Hanh (1991) defined Mindfulness as awareness of the present moment. Hanh suggested that awareness of the self in the present moment is the "foundation of a happy life". He uses Mindfulness as a meditation technique involving conscientious breathing in order to bring the person back to the present moment. Bringing the person to the present moment and focusing the person in the now, allows the person to maintain awareness of the person's present behavior, thoughts, and feelings.

Mindfulness is defined as "a state of mind that results from drawing novel distinctions, examining information from new perspectives, and being sensitive to context" (Langer, 1993). In contemporary psychology, Mindfulness has been defined and adapted "as an approach for increasing awareness and responding skillfully to mental processes that contribute to emotional distress and maladaptive behavior" (Bishop, Lau, & Shapiro, 2004).

"Mindfulness begins by bringing awareness to current experience—observing and attending to the changing field of thoughts, feelings, and sensations from moment to moment—by regulating the focus of attention. This leads to a feeling of being very alert to what is occurring in the here-and-now. It is often described as a feeling of being fully present and alive in the moment." "Mindfulness is further defined by an orientation to experience that...[involves] making a commitment to maintain an attitude of curiosity about where the mind wanders." (Bishop et al., 2004).

Mindfulness—the focused awareness on the thinking process—is taught in many ways. Two applications that might be helpful are the focus on the process of thinking in the present moment of experience, and the meditation of the bubble, which highlights the non-engagement of our thoughts.

Mindfulness training enables an individual to understand that he/she is the producer of his/her thoughts and those thoughts come and go and influence his/her feelings and actions. One exercise to enhance awareness of how they are the producers of their own thoughts is the following: Close your eyes and say to yourself, I wonder what my next thought is going to be. Then become very alert and wait for the next thought. Be like a cat watching a mouse hole. What thought is going to come out from the mouse hole?

To focus on awareness of the thinking process as well as on letting go and not engaging thoughts, the meditation of the bubble is a useful mindfulness technique. The purpose of this practice is to slow down, observe thoughts, and release them or let go without judgment.

Mindfulness aims at self awareness. It acts as a stepping stone towards spirituality. A mindful individual has the capacity to simulate, to suspend his/her judgmental attitude and acts ethically in this world.

### Benefits of Mindfulness

Various researches have shown that practicing mindfulness, even for just a few weeks, can bring a variety of physical, psychological, and social benefits. Here are some of these benefits, which extend across many different settings.

- Mindfulness helps us to focus: Research findings on mindfulness shows that mindfulness helps to tune out distractions and improves memory and attention skills.
- Mindfulness helps in body regulation: One of the research findings establish the results, after just eight weeks of training, practicing mindfulness boosts immune system's ability to fight off illness. Mindfulness can help in relieving stress and anxiety, treating heart disease, lowering blood pressure, reducing chronic pain, improving sleep and alleviating gastrointestinal difficulties (Helpguide.Org: A Trusted Non-Profit Resource, 2014).
- Mindfulness is good for mind and brain: Several studies have found that mindfulness increases positive emotions, reduces negative emotions and stress. Research has found that it increases density of gray matter in brain regions linked to learning, memory, emotion regulation, and empathy.
- Mindfulness enhances relationships and is good for parents as well as for would be parents: Research suggests mindfulness training makes couples more satisfied with their relationship, makes each partner feel more optimistic and relaxed, and makes them feel more accepting of and closer to one another. Some studies suggest it may reduce pregnancy-related anxiety, stress, and depression in expectant parents. Those parents who practice mindfulness report being happier with their parenting skills and their relationship with their kids.
- Mindfulness fosters compassion and selflessness: Research suggests mindfulness training makes us more likely to help someone in need, understands the suffering of others and regulates emotions. Evidence suggests it might boost self-compassion as well.
- Mindfulness helps school teachers: There's scientific evidence that teaching mindfulness in the classroom reduces behavioral problems and aggression among students. It also improves their happiness levels and ability to pay attention. Teachers trained in mindfulness also show lower blood pressure, less negative emotions and symptoms of depression, and greater compassion and empathy.
- Mindfulness helps health care professionals to cope up with stress, connect with their patients, and improve their general quality of life.
- Mindfulness fights obesity: Practicing "mindful eating" encourages healthier eating habits, helps people to lose weight, and helps them savor the food

they do eat.

- Mindfulness helps prisons: Evidence suggests mindfulness reduces anger, hostility, and mood disturbances among prisoners by increasing their awareness of thoughts and emotions, helping with their rehabilitation and reintegration (Greater Good Science center, 2014).

When learning mindfulness skills, it is usually recommended that we start practicing mindfulness of the breath, then mindfulness of the body, before moving on to mindfulness of thoughts.

### What is Meta-cognition?

The term meta-cognition is derived from two words “meta” and “cognition”, where “meta” is a prefix from Greek meaning beyond or behind; and “cognition” refers to the mental result of perception, learning and reasoning. Thus the term ‘meta-cognition’ means ‘what lies behind the ways of thinking that result in perception and reasoning’. It is like “thinking beyond thinking”, or “thinking about thinking”—a notion that disguises much more complicated concepts that have kept scientists, philosophers, and educators puzzling for hundreds of years. Puzzles such as “How can we truly think about our own thinking”, when the brain that is doing the thinking is also the thing that is being thought about?!

According to Flavell (1979), who coined the term, meta-cognition is a regulatory system that includes (a) knowledge, (b) experiences, (c) goals, and (d) strategies. According to Brown (1987), “Meta-cognition refers loosely to one’s knowledge and control of one’s own cognitive system. Two primary problems with the term are: it is difficult to distinguish between what is meta and what is cognitive; and there are many different historical roots from which this area of inquiry developed. The confusion that follows the use of a single term for a multifaceted problem is the inevitable outcome of mixing metaphors”.

Pressley and McCormick (1995), “It is knowledge of thinking processes, both knowledge of thinking occurring in the here and now (e.g., “I am really struggling to figure out how to write this introduction; I believe that the introduction I have just written makes sense”) and in the long term (e.g., “I know a number of specific strategies for planning a composition, rough drafting it, and revising the draft”)”.

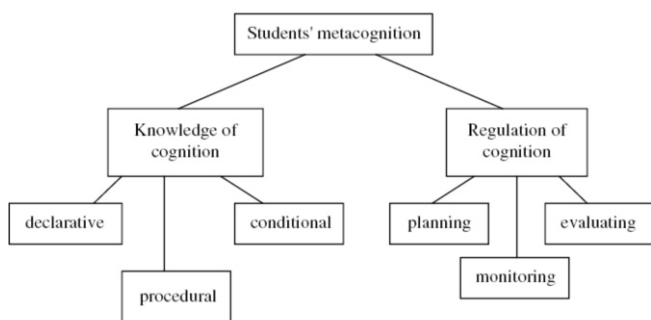
King (1999), “Metacognition involves the ability to think about own cognitions, and to know how to analyze, to draw conclusions, to learn from, and to put into practice what has been learned”.

Meta-cognition refers to a level of thinking that involves active control over the process of thinking used in different learning situations. Planning the way to approach a learning task, monitoring comprehensively, and evaluating the progress towards the completion of a task: these are the skills that are meta-cognitive in their nature.

Meta-cognition is classified into three components:

1. Meta-cognitive knowledge (also called meta-cognitive awareness) is what individuals know about themselves and others as cognitive processors.
2. Meta-cognitive regulation is the regulation of cognition and learning experiences through a set of activities that help people control their learning.
3. Meta-cognitive experiences are those experiences that have something to do with the current, on-going cognitive endeavour. (Wikipedia, 2012).

The metacognition’s structure of Schraw (1998)



### Mindfulness and its Role in improving Meta-cognitive Skills

Mindfulness can be thought of as creating an optimally receptive state for new learning and experience, increasing the likelihood that appropriate meta-cognitive skills will be selected and employed (Garland, 2007; Thomas, 2006). Mindfulness involves the ability to notice and observe one’s own thoughts impartially. This aspect of mindfulness makes it a meta-cognitive skill, involving thinking about thinking, which is the central component of various skills like knowledge of cognition and regulation of cognition.

Mindfulness practice leads to enhance one’s meta-cognitive skills or self regulatory skills such as planning, monitoring and evaluating, which further enhances one’s learning in different situations. So, we can say that mindfulness is one of the best strategies to improve meta-cognitive skills.

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